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"THE AWAKENED CONSCIENCE"

By Holman Hunt

Current Art Topics

By "MAHLSTICK," London Correspondent

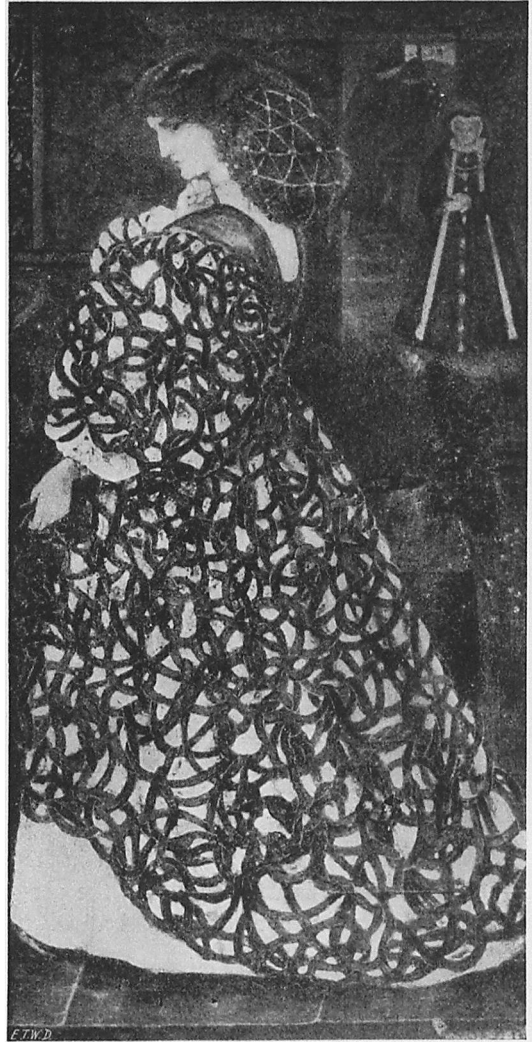
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SOME years ago there was a most interesting exhibition, one of the White-chapel series—that admirable effort to bring art to the very doors of the East End London masses—of which the catalogue now lies before me. It was called "British Art Fifty Years Ago" a somewhat comprehensive title, for most of the work displayed belonged to what was known then and since, as the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, and to the painters who though never formally affiliated, were strongly influenced by it, and in close relation-

ship to it—such men as Watts, Leighton, Noel Paton and others.

Its leaders, Dante Rossetti, Madox Brown, Burne Jones, Holman Hunt, William Dyce, Lindsay Windus, etc., etc., are recognized as the outstanding artists of the nineteenth century in England: Constable, Turner, hardly enter into competition—and Whistler's position is still debatable. Barely two generations separate the cycle of their achievement, from our own day, but five hundred years instead of fifty, might well be the time-equivalent of

the gulf that separates their ideals and conceptions of art and its purposes, from ours. We may take it broadly that the modern contention is that "Art for Art's Sake" covers the whole field of art's purpose and mission: that It is an aesthetic emotion concerned only with its own expression, and remote and apart from life and its interest, and indifferent to them. That it is degraded from its high estate when employed to recall the historic and storied past to embody the dreams of romance and the beliefs and hopes of religion, or to portray the varied panorama of contemporary life. A rhythmic line, a few tone values or color harmonies, the vase, or the rug, or the picture, they should be each and all equally oblivious of every consideration outside the aesthetic emotion: equally beautiful but equally inarticulate. This divorce from life lies at the root of the dominant conception of our time. To feel, but neither to think, preach nor narrate, we postulate as the artistic static condition. And we are serenely convinced that herein we have attained truth and finality. Yet looking at the illustrations in this catalogue, inadequately as they represent their originals, we find that the artists who gave most distinction to the nineteenth century regarded art only as the handmaiden of history or romance, of poetry, nature and life. They had a moral to point, a story to tell, an incident to relate, a dream, a vision to reveal, and they were only concerned with art as their vehicle of expression. These men of genius spent laborious days in painting what we now dub the literary or anecdotal picture. Rossetti wrote poems that will live and painted pictures that we love, for exactly the same reason, to reveal articulately his visions and his dreams of a world of weird romance: not to express some vague emotion of color or form or pattern, and in doing so "these were added unto him." He and "the brethren" as they called themselves not only filled their canvasses with anecdotal and symbolical incident and detail but they called in the pen to the aid of the brush; so that some of their finest works made their debut before the public, chaperoned by a leaflet or pamphlet elucidating the relation of the various details and incidents to the main



SIDONIA VON BORK
"THE CLOISTER WITCH"
By Sir E. Burne Jones

story. Holman Hunt and Madox Brown notably were guilty, so to speak, of this cardinal sin. The latter's famous picture "Cromwell on his Farm" amounts really to a pictorial cryptogram. Cromwell's preoccupation with the affairs of his time is indicated by the fallen reins and the horse browsing, and by the calling wife in the background, cross that he has forgotten the dinner hour, the burning brushwood prefigured the consuming wrath that was to overtake his enemies and so on through a wealth of symbolism which the artist himself considered required a leaflet of

some pages to explain. Or again the picture by Sir E. Burne Jones entitled "Sidonia Von Bork" here reproduced, displays unabashed the subservience of its fine decorative effect to the indicating of her life's story. Known in the sixteenth century as the "Cloister Witch," a fiend incarnated as a beautiful woman—she was burnt at the stake after, on the rack, confessing to a life of diabolism and sorcery, lust and murder. All this is intended to be suggested to us by the fantastic intricacies of the black velvet ornamentation on the white gown she is wearing. Again in the picture by Holman Hunt called "The Awakened Conscience" let us listen to the painter's own description or interpretation of this sermon in paint: "It represents a girl entangled in an evil life by a dissolute man, who has established her in a showy little London house. Idly touching the notes of the cottage piano before which they sit, the remembered song of 'Oft the Stilly Night' comes up and suddenly startles the girl into the consciousness of the evil course she is pursuing and the memory of her once good life comes back to her" and then is quoted a verse of the song.

This theme so ineffaceably Victorian in its moral sentimentality is worked out in the picture with a wealth of symbolical and allusive detail that to our ideas is amazing, and none the less, that it is painted with extraordinary emphasis and insistence of color and form. It was of this picture that Whistler exclaimed "Great Scott! and done in permanent colors, too." Holman Hunt gloried in his ability to impart to the objects and details in his pictures an outer and an inner meaning. "The Shadow of the Cross," "The Hireling Shepherd," "The Scapegoat," will readily recur to the mind in this connection. Yet his art will live; one only has to experience its grip when it is seen, for instance, set amidst the work of the Barbizon School to realize its power, vitality and conviction. I well remember seeing the "Hireling Shepherd" in the same room with a collection of Corot's and Millet's at the Goupil Galleries years ago, and how flimsy and almost insincere they seemed besides the intense conviction and the astounding and intimate realism of the Holman Hunt.

Burton's "Cavalier and Puritan" is almost a novelette in paint. I cannot refrain from quoting again at length, the artist's syllabus of his work: "A lady and her puritan lover as they pass along a roadway skirting a dense wood, come to a spot where a fierce conflict has taken place where one of the combatants has been desperately wounded. His pockets have been searched for papers, and several playing cards have fallen out. In striking a blow at his adversary he has cut deeply into a tree breaking his sword, leaving part of the weapon in the tree. The time he has lain there is betokened by the cob-web that has woven itself about the sword. The lady tries to staunch the wound, while her companion merely looks on, his bitterness towards all cavaliers intensified in this instance: for the richly dressed and high-born Royalist has also awakened his jealousy."

It would not be easy to surpass this for unsophisticated and pictorial story-telling; to us it is quite childlike. Yet the Pre-Raphaelite brethren were neither unsophisticated or childlike. What Madox Brown, Dante Rossetti, Holman Hunt or William Windus did not know about art and life was not worth knowing. This I can vouch for from personal knowledge of these men in my student days in Madox Brown's studio. Now these men were leaders in their time and generation, their work is yearly more and more highly valued and sought after, but whilst admiring it we do not hesitate to condemn and ridicule without reservation the principles and the ideals which gave birth to these pictures, ideals moreover which were only a development even if carried too far, of those which had been accepted unquestioned through the ages, and have in their results stood the test of time prolonged through centuries. The innovations of modernism which we so complacently regard as "Art at last come to its own" are but of yesterday, the paint is hardly dry on the canvasses, while Messrs. Roger Fry, Bell, Konody, Claude Philips & Company discourse to us about the "Old Masters," of the Impressionists, or forsooth, of the "Post Impressionists," etc., many of us contemplating the pictorial value of pictures on modern

lines tested by actual comparison side by side with the masterpieces of ancient art, as now can be seen at the National Gallery, London, where Corot and Sisley, Whistler, Monet and Manet's, etc., are hung among the work of the mighty past, noting their harshness, their thinness, against the mellow glow and depth of a Titian or a Rembrandt, the prose and pigment of a Manet against the romance and glamour of a Botticelli, have considerable qualms about accepting these flattering conclusions as to our own position in the hierarchy of art so popular in advanced circles. Instead of being the "consummation" we may prove to be but a phase and a very ephemeral one at that. We do not, I am afraid, see the aims and accomplishment of our time sufficiently in perspective.

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Happily among the younger men, especially of the British and American Schools, there are very distinct signs of a recovered balance. They fully rejoice in the freedom from the conventions and restrictions deduced as time went on from the work of the masters of each age, and imposed on their followers, but for which the masters nor their work cannot be held responsible, no more than the ten Commandments could be blamed for the endless laws and rules of the Pharisaic Code; but this acquired freedom is being disciplined and curbed, and no longer runs riot; in the case of men like Connard, Cadell, Orpen, Baird, Charles John Collings and others it is but the charter of their individuality. As I announced last month the exhibitions in London have this autumn and winter renewed their normal

routine with hardly an exception, and these are to be found only in the exhibitions usually held in the galleries of the principal dealers, and which are often of supreme interest, as for instance, the Connard Exhibition at the Leicester a year or so ago, or the two Collings Exhibitions at the Carroll Gallery, which were admittedly the outstanding features of the art season of their respective years. The Fine Art Society is showing, however, an exhibition of works by Norman Wilkinson at their rooms in Bond street, of sketches done by him at the Dardanelles, where he held the post of paymaster in the navy. The work carries conviction in a marked degree, as may be imagined from the circumstances of much of it having been executed more or less within the firing line. Norman Wilkinson like his friend Walter Bayes also having a display at the Carfax Galleries, both made their debut at and are members of the "Langham," that historic society I have so frequently referred to in these pages. I well remember the drawing Wilkinson made as a candidate for admission some ten or twelve years ago. It had to be a two hours sketch from a given subject. His contribution to the show was a large water-color of an iron-clad, gray and grim, driving through a heavy sea, beneath a leaden stormy sky, the mighty bulk and turrets wreathed in streaming spray and steam and smoke; it was a revelation of the pictorial possibilities of the iron dreadnought. The prominence of the artist brotherhood in the war in many ways has frequently been commented on, and may furnish some interesting items for another occasion.